

Parents of soldier who refused deployment to Iraq speak in California

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Bob Watada and Rosa Sakanishi, the father and stepmother of US Army First Lieutenant Ehren Watada, the first commissioned officer to publicly refuse deployment to Iraq, spoke at a gathering of more than 150 students at Glendale Community College on October 3. They discussed their son's impending court martial for his stance against the Iraq war.

The meeting was hosted by the Glendale Community College's Justice Coalition student group, and is part of a tour being undertaken across southern California by Watada's parents to publicize his case.

Watada is facing a number of charges, including one count of missing troop movement, two counts of making contemptuous statements about President Bush, and three counts of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman.

The charges against Watada represent the first time since 1965 that the military is prosecuting an objector for his opinions, and he faces up to more than eight years in prison—six years' imprisonment for making contemptuous statements. These charges represent a major attack on the right of free speech and are an attempt to intimidate oppositional sentiment that is developing within the military itself.

In September, an additional charge was added of conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman after a statement made by the 28-year-old officer during a public address. He argued, "To stop an illegal and unjust war, soldiers can choose to stop fighting it."

The charges arose following a decision made on June 22 by Watada to refuse deployment to Iraq with his unit, which is based at Fort Lewis, Washington. "I refuse to be party to an illegal and immoral war against people who did nothing to deserve our aggression," Watada said at the time.

He continued: "When I volunteered after 9/11 to

serve my country, I knew I would have to follow orders sometimes without rhyme or reason. Never did I believe I would have to follow orders that were contrary to my moral beliefs and illegal."

"This is a war based upon deception of the American people and conducted in full violation of the Geneva Conventions, international humanitarian law and the laws of land warfare," he argued.

On August 24, the article 32 pretrial hearing investigator recommended a general court martial for Watada on all charges. He is currently working in a military administrative position.

In her opening remarks to the Glendale meeting, Watada's stepmother Rosa said that Ehren was taking a stand for everybody, not just himself, and that he was fighting to defend the Constitution of the United States and campaigning to bring the troops home. She described Ehren as an intelligent and principled young man who wanted to see an end to the occupation of Iraq.

Bob Watada explained that Ehren joined the army in March 2003 during what he said was an atmosphere of hysteria and fear-mongering produced by the Bush administration's "war on terror" propaganda.

"Ehren wanted to serve his country in a war against terrorists to protect the country from attack," he said.

Ehren became a commissioned lieutenant at artillery school and spent a year posted in Korea. On his return, he was promoted to first lieutenant with 130 men under his command, whom he would have to lead in Iraq in combat operations.

As time passed, Bob Watada explained, Ehren began to realize that the president was lying to the American people about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and the claims that Iraq was importing uranium for nuclear weapons from the African nation

of Niger. Ehren had also rejected the lies about the supposed connection between Al Qaeda and the Iraqi regime.

His father added that he and his son believed, after further investigation, that the plans for war in Iraq had been made well before September 11. He came to the conclusion that 9/11 had become a pretext used to invade Iraq, and that the real reasons had nothing to do with fighting terrorists—which was the reason Ehren joined the army—but more to do with economics and politics.

Bob Watada also rejected the argument that the US had invaded Iraq to remove a dictator and promote freedom and democracy. “We don’t even have democracy in the US, how can we export it to Iraq?” he asked.

Watada went on to say that for the Bush administration, the American Constitution doesn’t apply, and the government has simply bypassed and ignored international laws and the Geneva Conventions in its invasion of Iraq.

During the question period, a supporter of John Burton, the Socialist Equality Party candidate for US Congress from the 29th Congressional District in the Los Angeles area, asked Watada if he could elaborate on the reasons behind the war.

Watada answered, “Why have they invaded? Oil and the oil rights of Iraq, on behalf of the oil corporations Halliburton, Exxon and Chevron. To colonize the resources of Iraq not just so the US can have oil, but to control the world price. This occupation is not for our country.”

The SEP is standing in the November elections on a platform that unequivocally opposes the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The party’s program calls for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US troops. It demands that all those responsible for the invasion of Iraq be compelled to stand trial before a war crimes tribunal.

The supporter of the SEP explained the position of the SEP campaign and defended the decision of Lieutenant Watada to refuse deployment and participation in a criminal war. The SEP, he said, called for the dropping of all charges against Watada and opposed any future charges against soldiers who took a stand against the war.



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